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DEMOCRATIC ASPECTS OF UNIVERSAL MILITARY SERVICE ¹

MUNROE SMITH

Professor of Comparative Jurisprudence, Columbia University

AS I have read the discussions of "preparedness" in the newspapers during the past year, and as I have heard the speeches this afternoon, I get the impression that words like "monarchic" and "democratic" are being used to express emotion rather than ideas. They are used as terms of censure or of praise, with little consideration of their real meaning or of the historical or the logical connection between modes of military service and forms of political organization.

In the whole course of European history there has been, broadly speaking, a fairly close connection between the rendering of military service and the exercise of political power. In the ancient Mediterranean cities, for instance, and in the Teutonic tribes, every free man who was a member of the army was a member of the assembly; and even in those cities or tribes that were called monarchic because they had kings, it appears that nothing of particular importance could be done without the consent of the whole body of free men. It was apparently necessary even for a king to satisfy himself that he would have the free fighting men behind him before he took any serious political step. In these more or less democratic organizations every able-bodied free man was trained for war and was held to military service.

After Rome became a military monarchy with a mercenary army, and after the Germans who had conquered the West-Roman Empire developed states that were nominally monarchic but really aristocratic, with feudal armies, politi-

¹ Discussion at the afternoon meeting of the Academy of Political Science, May 18, 1916.

cal organizations that were more or less democratic first reappeared when the cities of medieval Europe began to fight themselves free from the control of their feudal lords and to develop their own municipal governments. The fighting force of these cities consisted normally of the citizens, all of whom owed military service.

In the great modern European states, universal military service, which reappeared in revolutionary France, has been generally adopted because of its demonstrated economy and efficiency. The establishment of universal military service in European monarchies has not been followed by an increase of royal power; the tendency has been toward more democratic government. In all these states, not excepting Russia, the people have today some voice in determining the laws and policies of the country; and it looks as if, broadly speaking, the imposition of the duty of military service upon every able-bodied male citizen had forced the monarchic and aristocratic elements to concede to the people some measure of political rights. They had to admit that the men who are to fight for a country ought to have something to say about its government.

It would, of course, be absurd to say that universal military service necessarily makes a country democratic. It will not have this result if the people are monarchically minded. But if the people of a country are democratically minded, universal military service seems to make for constitutional government in monarchies, and for the maintenance of popular government in republics.

Historically, the system of hiring men to fight seems closely associated with monarchic absolutism. It destroyed popular government in the ancient Roman world, and in those medieval cities that adopted it. It destroyed feudal aristocracy, except where, as in England, the power of the king to maintain a standing army of mercenaries was jealously limited. Here the government remained essentially aristocratic until the nineteenth century. There is no reason to assume that such an army will necessarily destroy republican or democratic government, if it be limited in strength, if its supreme

control be placed in the hands of civilians, and if the country be democratically minded.

Historically, the system by which only those fight who have a mind to fight—the volunteer system—seems on the whole to make for aristocracy. One of the chief roots of the feudal system was the retinue, the *comitatus*; and this was composed originally of volunteers. The men who entered the retinue of a king or prince differed indeed from our modern short-term volunteers, in that they normally volunteered for life, or at least for that part of their life in which they could render efficient service. Modern volunteer service, however, is not wholly devoid of aristocratic features. In the German army the so-called “one-year volunteers” may be said to represent the natural aristocracy of the country; they are men of at least moderate means and of more more than average education. From these volunteers is drawn the greater part of Germany’s reserve officers. It is a corresponding class that is being drawn in our country into summer training camps.

That volunteer service creates a sense of superior merit is quite intelligible. This may easily beget claims. Those who voluntarily bear the burdens of the state are not unnaturally inclined to assert greater rights than they are willing to accord to the shirkers. In our country this sense of superior merit has shown itself, socially, in organizations of veterans of our various wars; and the distinctly aristocratic idea that those who have served the state in arms transmit credit to their descendants has appeared in the formation and perpetuation of various “orders”, from that of the Cincinnati to the junior membership of the Loyal Legion. A claim to political reward for military service has exhibited itself in the assertion of the prior right of veteran soldiers to civil appointments. To lay too much stress on these manifestations would be absurd; but they are not without significance. There has been throughout human history a very close relation between the discharge of political duties and the exercise of political powers. In the United States this exhibits itself most strikingly in what we call “machine” politics; and the analogies between our actual political system and the feudal system have

been frequently noted. The neglect of political duties by the majority of citizens and the discharge of those duties by volunteers has created a political oligarchy.

If we pass from history to theory, it is difficult to see why universal military service is not essentially the democratic system. This can hardly be questioned by any one who admits that democracy means equality of duties as well as equality of rights. Those, indeed, who identify democracy with liberty alone, and not with liberty and equality—those to whom democracy means the minimum of governmental constraint—may consistently assert that a volunteer army is essentially democratic. This idea of democracy, however, is a false one; and a democracy organized in accordance with this idea can not endure. Rights can be held permanently only by those who discharge corresponding duties; and the natural tendency of *laissez faire*, in the political as in the economic system, is toward oligarchy.

The most serious objections, however, to relying upon volunteer armies are not political. Of the technical military objections I need not speak; they have been amply indicated. It is the social objection which I desire to stress. It is one of the greatest evils of war that it spares those who are physically defective and confines its ravages to those who are physically sound. It is the greatest evil of the volunteer system that it slays or maims those who are most energetic and enterprising, who have the highest courage and the warmest devotion to their country, while it spares the inert, the timid and the selfish. If modern war makes in any case for the survival of the physically unfit, modern war waged by volunteer armies makes for the survival of the socially unfit.

Returning to political theory, the standing army of hired soldiers seems essentially undemocratic. If such an army is paid by the people, and if it owes obedience, not to a ruler personally, but to an executive chosen by the people, it may not produce Cæsarism; but in a constitutional monarchy or in a republic, a mercenary army savors of plutocracy, in that it throws the burden of national defense, at least so far as the rank and file of the fighting force is concerned, upon the

needier part of the community, the Have-nots. Within limits, such an army may be as necessary in the greater modern states as are bodies of municipal police in modern cities. Even in those states which carry universal military training to the highest point of efficiency, special forces must be enlisted for colonial service; and in those states which do not enforce universal military training, or do not carry it far, a standing enlisted army is needed to meet the first shock of invasion. But to entrust the defense of a country entirely to such an army is not only economically impracticable and politically dangerous, because of the dimensions which such an army must assume, but it is undemocratic, because it violates the principle of equal duty. To supplement the regular professional army by conscription and to permit those who are drafted to buy substitutes, as we did in the War of the Rebellion, is even more objectionable. Such a system is in the highest degree plutocratic.

By a process of exclusion, it seems to me, we come to the result that the defense of the country must, on democratic principles, be secured through universal military service; and if universal military service is to be enforced, we must have universal—that is to say, compulsory—military training. How much training shall be required is, of course, a technical military question; and its answer depends on the peculiar situation and needs of each country.